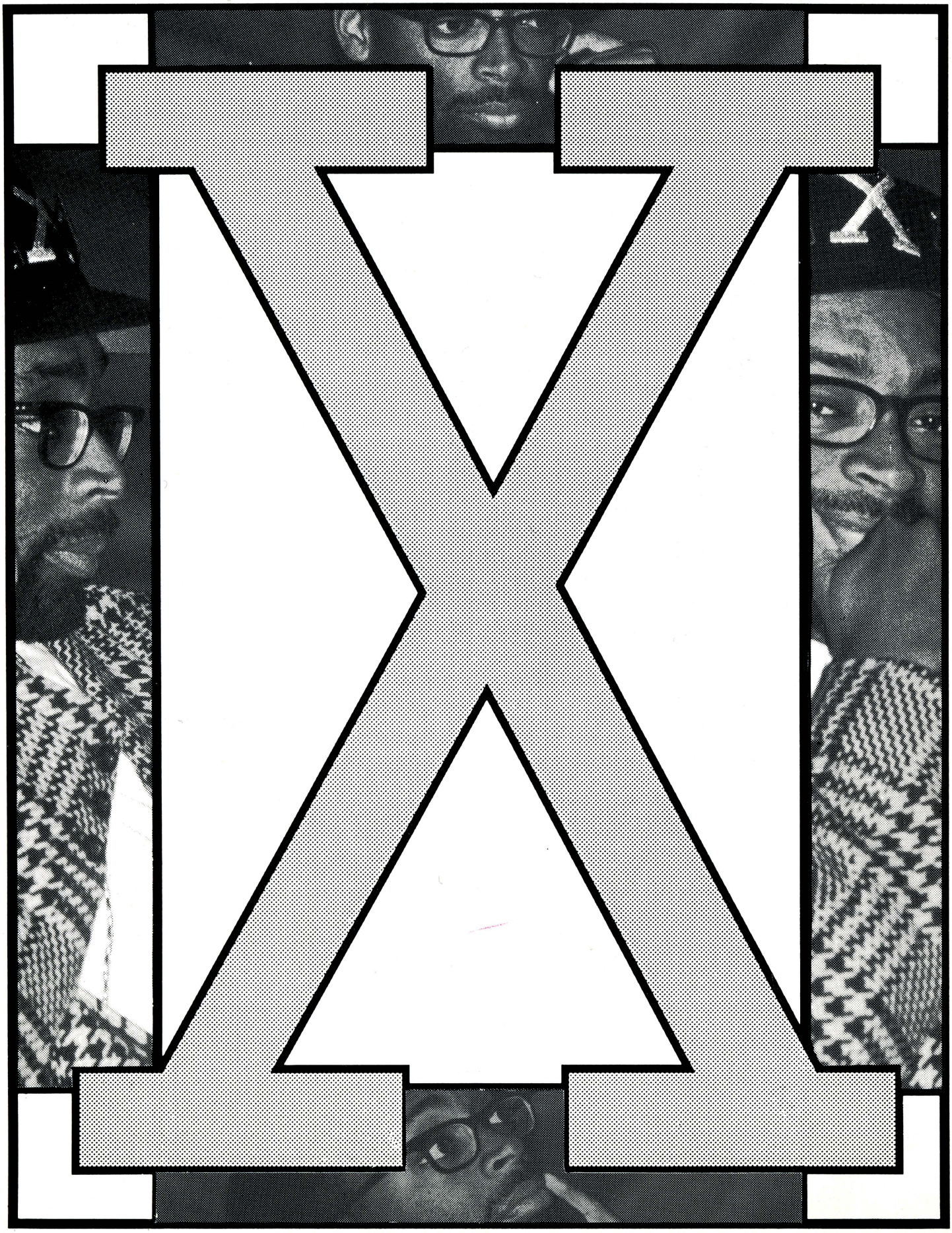
2-15-1992

A Conversation With Spike Lee

Spike Lee

Chap Freeman
Columbia College Chicago



a
conversation
with

Spike Lee

February 15, 1992

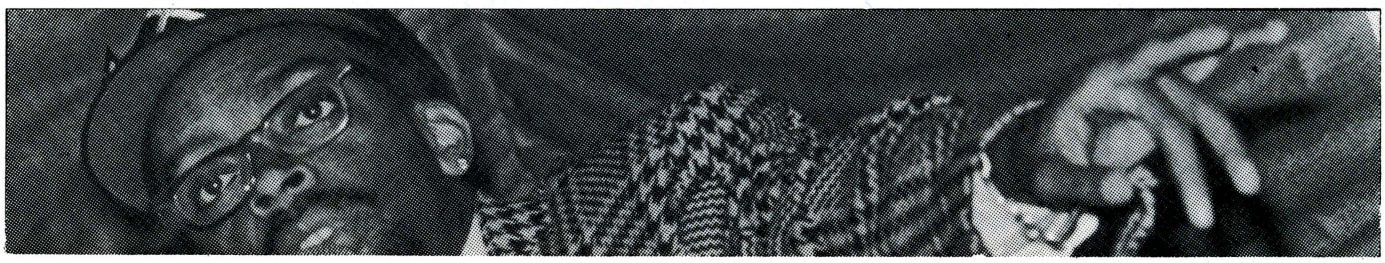
Good afternoon. I'm Chap Freeman, co-chairperson with Doreen Bartoni of the Film & Video Department of Columbia College. Most of you in the audience are connected with Columbia in some way, and some of you have been students in the Film & Video Department, so you know that our program emphasizes two things which we think are important for anyone who wants to become a good filmmaker. One of these is self-expression and the other is the ability to work from your own background when you come up with ideas. Here's a man who's done both of those things. He's a filmmaker who started making movies in his own neighborhood, and transformed that neighborhood into a metaphor for the whole culture. He's a man with a lot of issues to discuss, who's found a way to express those issues and build an audience at the same time. When you watch one of his movies, you know you're having a conversation with someone in particular, who's talking to you about things that really matter to him. I can't think of anything better than that. Ladies and gentlemen, Spike Lee.

Thank you. I want to say, first of all, that I'm glad to be here and I'm glad that David Stern worked me into the NBA schedule so that I could see the Knicks beat the Bulls tonight. It's perfect scheduling. When the school asked me what I wanted to screen today, I never thought I'd be showing this Mike Tyson film right after he got sentenced. HBO had asked me to do a short mini-documentary that would be aired before one of his fights, and it turned out to be the fight where Mike knocked out Alex Stewart in the first round. We just tried to give Mike and Don King a forum because they've been maligned in the press so often. I told them just to talk and whatever they wanted to say we'd put in the best form possible. It came out really good and I'm really proud of it. It won a sports Emmy, too. I'm just sad that things have turned out the way they have for Mike Tyson. I'm not saying whether he was guilty or not. I just think that there are two standards of justice in this country and it's always been like that. I guess Mike Tyson's not a Kennedy. I don't know how a Black man is supposed to get a fair trial in front of an all-white jury in the state of Indiana which has historically been a Klan hotbed. So that's beyond me. In New York there's a case where some St. John's students raped a Black woman. I mean the guy admitted it and he only got something like 300 hours of community service. But that's the difference in this country. It's always been about whether you're Black or white no matter what Michael Jackson says. I don't know what world he's living in, but if it didn't make a difference he wouldn't be using all that chemical peeling.

We just finished shooting <u>Malcolm X</u>. We started shooting in September in New York City, New Jersey and upstate New York. We shut down for Christmas and then went to Africa, Egypt and Johannesburg to finish up the film. Right now, we're editing. The film will be in the theaters by Christmas and I hope everyone comes out to see it. It's the biggest thing that any of us have done. When I say any of us, I mean the people I've been working with since <u>She's Gotta Have It</u>. Ernest Dickerson, who made the film, <u>Juice</u> — which, hopefully, all of

you have seen — has shot all my films. We met at NYU film school. Wynn Thomas is the production designer, Robi Reed cast all my films, Ruth E. Carter does the costumes, Monty Ross has been with me since Morehouse and all of us have been working together for the last seven years. I think one of the reasons why we've been able to be successful is that none of us have rested on our laurels. We want to keep growing and getting better. And it's only because of the work that people have done on our five previous films — She's Gotta Have It, School Daze, Do the Right Thing, Mo' Better Blues and Jungle Fever — that enabled us to take on something as big and as important as Malcolm X. We finally wrestled the project away from Norman Jewison. The way we approached it was that it had to be one of the most important films in the history of cinema so we advised anyone that didn't feel like that to not even come on the set. But despite that, it was a struggle to make the film, not only because of what was happening in front of the camera, but because of the stuff going on behind the scenes. We had a lot of detractors, some spearheaded by Amiri Baraka who said I was too middle-class and bourgeoisie to direct a film on Malcolm X. Denzel Washington, first of all, was signed to play the role of Malcolm. Denzel had played Malcolm in an off-Broadway play, "When Chickens Come Home to Roost". Marvin Worth, the producer, bought the rights from the late Alex Haley and Malcolm's widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz, 20 years ago, and for 20 years he's been trying to get this film made. There were many directors and actors attached to the project. David Mamet wrote a script with Sidney Lumet who wanted Richard Pryor to play Malcolm X. That was before the fire. There also was a young Black writer named David Bradley who wrote a script with Alex Haley in it and Eddie Murphy, at one time, wanted to play Alex Haley. Most recently, Norman Jewison was attached to the project. Norman had signed a deal with Warner Brothers, where the project was, and they gave him a list of the properties they owned. He wanted to do Malcolm X and got Charles Fuller to write two drafts. Charles Fuller is the Pulitzer prize-winning writer from A Soldier's Story and they had worked together on that film. Charles had written two drafts but Norman was not satisfied with either of them. About the time it became public that Norman was going to direct the film, I became vocal about it and actively campaigned for the job. He did ask me to direct the film although I never knew it. Marvin says he sent me a letter after Do the Right Thing came out asking me if I wanted to direct the film. I never got it, but he sent me a copy so I have to believe him. By the time I found out about it, though, Norman was directing it, so it became a question of how we were going to get the film. I had to meet with Norman and make it seem like it was his idea and that he wasn't being forced out. We did not want it to seem like he had been bum-rushed, but he gracefully bowed out and we took over.

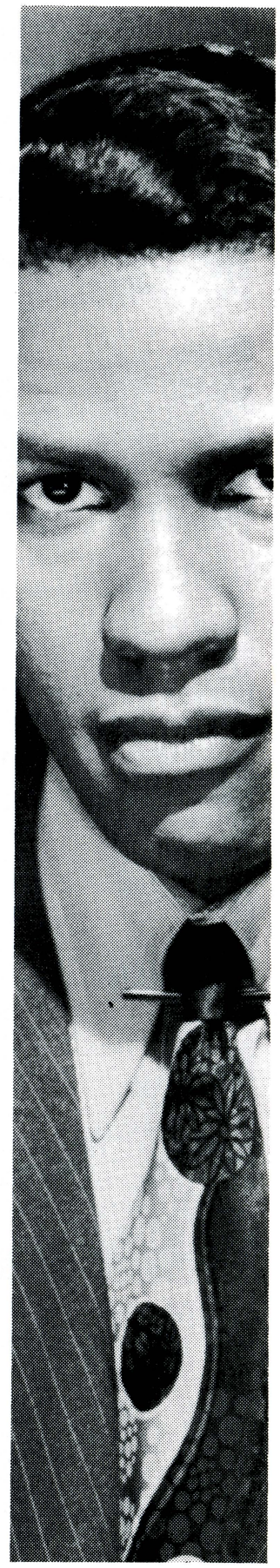
Of all the scripts I read, the first one was the best. It was written by James Baldwin back in 1969 with the assistance of another writer, Arnold Pearl. James was drinking heavily at that time and he really couldn't complete it so Marvin brought Arnold on. The weakness in the

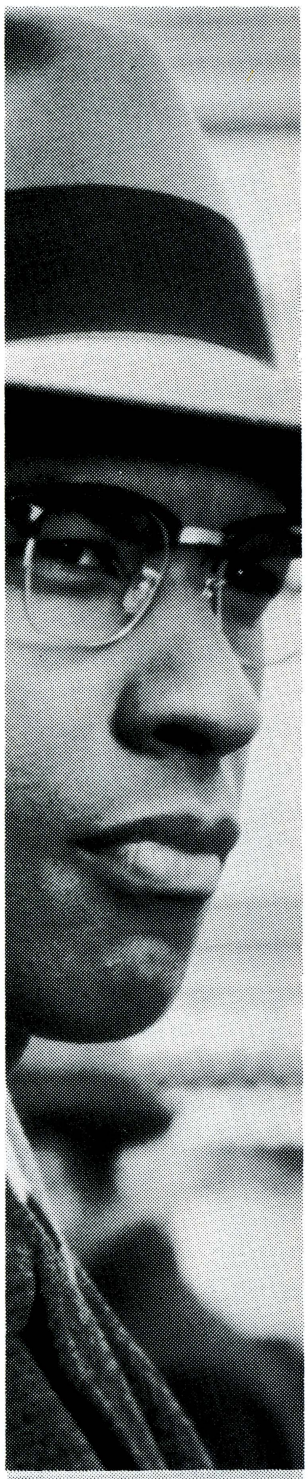


script was the last act which dealt with Malcolm's split with the Nation and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. It did not really deal with the assassination. When James Baldwin wrote the script there was still a lot of bad blood between Malcolm's camp and the Nation and it was still unclear who assassinated Malcolm. But in the years that have gone by a lot of the information has come out. Talmadge Hayer, one of the three men that went to prison — he was guilty, but the other two were set up — has come out and named all the assassins. So now we're able to rewrite the whole third act and put all of this information into the film. We also chose not to end the film with Malcolm's assassination on the stage of the Audubon Ballroom. We felt that if we did that we'd really be saying that Malcolm is dead and his legacy is dead and that is not the case at all, especially today. Malcolm is more popular now than he's ever been. So we chose to end the film in Soweto. That's why we went to South Africa. I always thought that one of the most important things about the many doctrines of Malcolm was his vision of Pan-Africanism and how a lot of us are still fighting our African heritage. So we wanted to try to make that connection at the end of the film to show that there is a bond even though the Atlantic Ocean is between us. There is a bond between Soweto and Harlem or Chicago's south side or Watts — wherever you want to go where there are people of color — and that's why we chose to end the film there. You must not be deceived into thinking that apartheid is over just because Nelson Mandela was freed. It's one thing to read about apartheid or see it on television on the 11:00 news, but when you go there and see it in its reality it's nothing like you could have imagined. We went into the townships and the conditions that Black people have to live in there are atrocious. They are like concentration camps. Again, I think that we really have to rededicate ourselves to bringing an end to apartheid by staying on the U.S. corporations that are still doing business there. There's a whole public relations campaign going on that everything is all right because they let Nelson out and both sides are sitting down to a peaceful resolution. Well, I have some doubts about that. I don't think it's going to come to a peaceful resolution. Why should this be the first time in history that a government in power has handed over their power to somebody else? That's never happened in the history of the world. South Africa is one of the richest countries in the world — gold, minerals, all that stuff. There's no way those 6 million Afrikaans are going to say, "Here, come on. Take all this wealth that is rightfully yours. We know we came here and bogarted, stole this land from you, but we've realized our wrongs, so come on in." That's not going to happen. No way. And I think that it's going to be resolved the way most things are — especially when it concerns something at that level — which is bloodshed. I'm not up here advocating it, but I think that's the only way the people, the true inhabitants of South Africa, are going to be able to get into power. While we were there we were able to meet Mr. Mandela. It was a very moving experience for the crew and the cast and he said he was going to try to make the premiere when the film comes out this Christmas. Other than that, that's all we were doing. We were devoting ourselves 100% toward making this the best film it could be. I know you might have read stories that we have lost control of the film, but that is not true at all. We still have creative control. We're just having some financial problems because the film never had a realistic budget to begin with. This film is an epic film so we did not want to compromise on its scope, and to tell Malcolm's story truthfully, it had to be a three-hour-plus film. Warner Bros. had another idea, but we went ahead nonetheless. I said from the beginning that this was a $33 million film. Warner Bros. was in for 18 or 19. They sold the foreign rights to Largo for 8-1/2, but there was still $5 million that had to come from somewhere. We had two decisions: we could put the film on hold and wait

for the money to come or we could move ahead. We chose to move ahead. We felt it would have been disastrous to stop, especially when we had gained momentum we might never be able to recapture. Denzel's schedule was free, we were all hyped and so we went ahead. We just had to take the opportunity in the hope that we might be able to find some outside financing before the film was released. We're still looking for that, but in the interim the completion bond company came in and took over the film. A completion bond company is like an insurance company for films that is paid a fee by the studio to finance the completion of the film in case it goes over budget. Now nine times out of ten, when a film goes over budget the studios come in to assist the completion bond company. Rarely do they let the bond company take the full hit. But Warner Bros. was holding the line on it, so when the bond company asked Warner Bros. to come in and help us out they said no and we were stuck in the middle. So about two weeks before we wrapped — I was surprised how long it took them to catch on, you know, the way we were spending money — they came in and took over financial control of the film. But we still have creative control and that's the most important thing. In order for the completion bond company to get their money back, they have to deliver the film to Warner Bros., but we told them that unless this film is made the way we want to do it, we're just gonna hold out. I'll disappear somewhere with the negative until things are worked out. So those are the kinds of financial games that are being played now. But from the beginning I said that the film was going to cost that amount so I really don't see this film as being over budget. We just would not, did not, want to compromise. Also, there are two standards in Hollywood — one Black and one white — and unless you're Eddie Murphy you're just not considered to be in the same ballgame. This is not to say that Black films are not being made and will not continue to be made, but you have to look at the budgets for these films. Columbia will make 100 more Boyz N the Hood. That film cost $6 million and made $57 million. Those are great numbers, but what we as Black filmmakers are trying to do now is raise the ceiling. Black people in the corporate world face a glass ceiling and so do filmmakers. There is a ceiling on the amount of money they're going to spend on a film in both production and marketing.

So it really comes back down on us. There's gonna have to come a time when we gather our resources and start financing our own films. We can't always count on Hollywood to do something that we should be doing for ourselves. I would have loved to have made Malcolm X somewhere else, but the reality is that Warner Bros. owned the property. There's no legal way that a film could be made about Malcolm X that wasn't a documentary. Warner Bros. owned the property, but even if they didn't.....I couldn't find $33 million among Black entrepreneurs without spending four or five years of my life. Black filmmakers a couple of generations ahead of me spent most of their creativity trying to raise





money. And then once they did all that and the film was made, nobody saw it except at a university, a library or during Black History Month.

When I was in film school, I always knew I wanted my films to be seen, so it's always been a question of how to do that. I did not want to make junk and it's always been my belief that you can combine thought-provoking material with entertainment because film is a business. If She's Gotta Have It had not made 8-1/2 million dollars, I would not have been able to get the 6-1/2 million to make School Daze. It was the success of each film that made it possible to do the next one. I was able to establish my independence because I was able to make She's Gotta Have It myself. There was no studio or anybody else telling me what to do, so when the film became a success and the studios started to call I could make certain demands that they would have to comply with if they wanted to do business with me. First and foremost, my demand was to have final cut and I've had final cut on all my films. It's easy to get final cut when you're doing a film for $6-1/2 or $7 million, which Do the Right Thing cost — Mo' Better Blues was $10 million and Jungle Fever was $14 million — but it starts to get harder when you're talking $33 million and that's what Malcolm X will eventually cost. Another battle that we're going to have with Warner Bros. down the line is the length of the film. For the most part, all studio heads care about is money and when you tell them you want a three-hour film, the first thing they think about is that it's one less showing they'll be able to have in the theater. They think that if Dances With Wolves would have been released at two hours it would have been as good as a three-hour film. No way. If JFK would have been released at two hours, no way would it have been as good as a three-hour film. And we're very happy about Oliver Stone and JFK, especially since he did it through Warner Bros., so we want to hear no stuff next Christmas! I called Oliver and he told me everything that Warner Bros. gave him and we want the same thing next Christmas. We don't want to be treated like second-class citizens.

And now I'll just say a couple things that I hope some of the aspiring film students in the audience can use. I think the only reason why you should want to be a filmmaker is because you love cinema. That should be first and foremost. If you want to be rich, if you want to be famous, if you want to meet women or meet men, that's really, really, the wrong reason because when you hit that brick wall, when you hit the hardships, it's those people who drop out. I've seen this firsthand in my experience at NYU film school. And the ones who survive are the ones who love cinema. It is the most important thing in their life. This is what they want to do. This is what makes them happy. And that's what I see lacking in a lot of aspiring filmmakers when they come up to me and say they want to make films. I ask them what kinds of films they see and they say Diehard and I don't think that's the right answer. Or they'll say

that they want to be filmmakers, but they don't really go to the movies that often. I just don't understand that. If you're a filmmaker, you want to be a great filmmaker. You don't have to be an expert, but you have to know something about everything and you have to be able to read and write. The easiest way to become a filmmaker is to be a writer/director. There are so many examples of that: John Sayles, John Singleton, Julie Dash, myself, Scorsese, Jim Jarmusch, Oliver Stone. The people who are really making good films now are the ones who also write, so I stress working on your writing skills and reading scripts! For me, reading scripts was my most important learning process. Before, they rarely printed scripts so you would just trade with your friends, but today, plenty of film scripts are printed. That was great for me because I could read a script and then go see the film. To see someone take these words you're reading on paper and make them into a film opened up a whole world to me visually. And great people can make subpar scripts into great, great films. The person who does this best is Martin Scorsese. I read the script of Goodfellas and I didn't like it that much. I couldn't understand why he was doing the film, but when I saw the movie I said, "Damn..." Because his visual sense is so developed, it took the script onto another level and this was something I would never have known if I hadn't read the script. It really doesn't matter whether you see the movie first or read the script. That's one of the reasons why I always include the script in my books about the films I've been able to do. Right now I think that we really have to work on the demystification of film. It's no accident that there is this whole aura, this hocus-pocus magic stuff surrounding film. That is there for a purpose. They don't want you to make films. They don't want everybody to make films because film is too powerful a medium and you can influence too many people. And also, there's a ton of money made in the film industry. That is why, until this day, they still perpetuate this whole secret hocus-pocus "you have to struck by a lightning bolt to be a director" stuff. We hear things about certain directors like, "I went to see Bambi when I was six years old and right then and there I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker." But film can be learned, you know. It's a craft. I'm not saying that you don't need talent, but it can also be learned just like anything else. So now we're going to have a Q & A — questions, and hopefully, some answers — and I will try to entertain thought-provoking, entertaining and intelligent questions from the audience.

Grant money is down for filmmakers like us who are just out of college and looking for a job. It's hard enough to get a job just to pay your bills. Where do you advise us to find the money to get a project done? There's Chicago Access and Chicago Filmmakers, but we would need a pretty good-sized chunk of money for someone of our means to make a production and get it into a festival.

Well, I know it's hard, but it can be done. Matty Rich had gotten on a radio station in New York City and was able to get financing from people who called in. That's how he made Straight Out of Brooklyn. Robert Townsend, a Chicago native, used credit cards. For She's Gotta Have It, I had grants from the New York City Council of the Arts and the Jerome Foundation, we had a limited partnership and my grandmother gave me some money. She also put me through Morehouse and NYU film school. So there's plenty of ways to get the money. Two years ago, John Singleton was a senior at USC when he wrote a script that was sent to Columbia. They said, "We love the script. We want somebody to direct it," but he said, "No. If you want this, I have to direct it," and they let him have the chance. So it can be done.

I have a question about your casting methods. I know you have a casting director, but how do you seek new talent for your films?

Basically, new talent seeks us out and we always try to hold a couple of spots in each film for people who have never really had the exposure or were given a chance before.

I want to say that it's a privilege to hear you speak. I just saw Jungle Fever and I had a question about your endings because, you know, different people have different opinions about them. They say that he was trying to say this or he was trying to say that, especially in School Daze and Jungle Fever. I was just wondering what you were thinking about when you wrote them.

When Flipper Purify, Wesley Snipes' character in Jungle Fever, is walking down the block and a 13-year-old girl comes up to him and says, "I'll suck your dick for two dollars," right then he saw his daughter and thought, "This could be my daughter in the next couple of years." That's why he screamed. For me, the main thrust of Jungle Fever is not the interracial relationship. We leave that three-quarters of the way through the movie. I think, most importantly, the film is about drugs and its effect on the Black family in particular. For me, the film was about the disintegration of the Black family.

How did you go about securing a distributor for She's Gotta Have It?

Well, the San Francisco Film Festival was coming up and we knew who the independent distributors were so we wrote and told them that they should send somebody from their company for the world premiere and they did. Each company sent somebody and they all liked the film. Then the bidding war started and we sold the film to Island Pictures for, I think, $450,000. That's how it happened.

I heard that you formed your own record label and I want to know if I can send you a demo package.

The name of the label is 40 Acres and a Mule Musicworks and it's being distributed by Sony. We have our first album out and we are accepting demos.

I'm a big fan of yours and I like your work a lot. I was just wondering about television and what you think some of the inroads might be for the television industry. It seems like Black filmmakers are making some inroads in film, but in the television industry — primetime television and docudramas, for example — are there Black producers calling the shots or greenlighting projects?

I think probably the most powerful Black person in television — besides Bill Cosby — is Thomas Carter. They call him the king of the pilots. But other than them, there aren't many. I find TV to be very restrictive. They just want things quick in TV and I feel they don't really care about quality very much. That's why I haven't done anything in television yet.

Do you think public television is a market that can be exploited by Blacks?

There's a market, but the money is drying up. You need money to work in public television and with the president slashing everything, they don't have the money.

Can I be in your next movie? But seriously, I heard that Chameleon Street, a film that's being produced by a Black filmmaker, has had a lot of obstacles. Are you aware of Chameleon Street and can you speak on that?

I've seen Wendell Harris' film. I think it took him several years to find a distributor even though he had won awards at the Sundance Festival. It took Julie Dash over a year to get a distributor for Daughters of the Dust and she finally found Kino International. It's rough being an independent filmmaker, it's rougher being a Black independent filmmaker and it's roughest being a Black female independent filmmaker.

What's up with your next movie? I'm an actor.

Well, you could send a resume like everybody else.

I'd like to ask you about merchandising. The "X" hat that you're wearing has become a popular item across the country and I was wondering what it really means. A lot of people have different interpretations of the "X" hat, but what does it mean to you? Did you design it? And also, who do we contact for merchandise for your movie once it comes out?

Well, I designed the hat and started wearing it while we were making Jungle Fever. There's really nothing we can do about the knockoffs, so I just view it as extra promotion for the film. I mean, there is such an anticipation for this film that I can't go anywhere without people asking when the film's coming out. And they get mad when I tell them Christmastime. They think that it should be released during the summer because we've put a film out every summer for the last three years. I designed the hat specifically to promote the film and I kind of knew it would catch on. That's why I gave it to Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson and Magic to wear. I remember a national game last Christmas when Chicago was playing and they interviewed Michael when he was wearing the hat. Man, the next day when that store opened.....It's really just about marketing and I've understood from the beginning that I was not going to have the amount of money for my films that other films have. Do the Right Thing came out the same summer as Batman and there's no way that Universal Pictures, and rightfully so, is going to spend the same amount of money that Warner Bros. is spending on Batman. That means I have to do almost every interview, I have to get it on TV, I got to get it on radio, and promote and promote and promote. And this "X" hat is just another extension of marketing. But you can help us out by buying the real "X" hat and not the imitations that are

all across the country. We're opening up a store in L.A. this May and hopefully we'll be having one in Chicago very soon.

For the past few years, you've done some pretty good Air Jordan commercials. So why did they substitute Bugs Bunny for you this year?

That's a good question. Well, I think Nike had the opinion that Mike and I had done our stuff for four years and it was time to try something different. So they went with Bugs Bunny. That doesn't necessarily mean that Mars is dead forever, but even before they did that, Mike and I were wondering how much longer we could do it. We did feel though that we could have gone out with a bigger bang. Nike has a new shoe called "Air Raiders", a blacktop shoe for outdoor courts, so I'll be doing commercials for that, but not as Mars, just as Spike. I think that there might be a final hurrah, maybe a commercial where Mars dies.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to come and speak to you today. This type of forum is great not just for Black filmmakers, but for everyone that's in communications or the arts. Will you continue to have this type of forum around the country for people of color like myself?

We will continue, but I think that we have to go where the filmmakers are and I don't know how many filmmakers there are in Mississippi. Every year for the past four years we have held the Forty Acres and a Mule Film Institute seminars in Brooklyn. Every Saturday for seventeen weeks we have people come in and talk about different aspects of filmmaking. I think that next week Ernest is going to come and talk about being a DP and also about directing Juice. Reggie and Warrington Hudlin are going to come to talk about how things have been going on Eddie Murphy's film, Boomerang. There's a great need around the country, but we're really just one organization and that's all we can do.

That's understandable, but what I'm trying to get at is you yourself as an inspiration not only to filmmakers but to everyone. I am inspired right now just by being in your presence because I know what struggles you have gone through to get where you are. What I'm saying is that we need more people like you to talk to us so we can have that feeling inside of us to want to struggle and do more so that we can fight the power.

Thank you.

I admire your strength and I've been a fan of yours since 1986. What does the future hold for Spike Lee?

Well, after we finish X we're going to take a rest. At least I am. X was the sixth film we've done in the past seven years and it's been exhausting, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to still be doing stuff. I'm not going to direct any films, but right now we're looking for projects that I'm going to executive produce in an effort to get some low-budget films made for some young Black filmmakers. And we're looking for scripts written by African-American women in particular because I'm tired of all this yelling and screaming. If you want more realistic Black female characters on the screen then write those scripts. I'm waiting on them.

Obviously, you don't need to change the way you go about making your movies and the movies you make. I was wondering if you would ever be working out of your element, so to speak, such as Martin Scorsese did with Cape Fear. Would you ever work within the construct of some sort of genre or something?

I would like to do a musical one day, but I don't know if that's really out of my element since music plays such an important role in all my films. Do you mean subject matter or genre?

Genre, I guess. Cape Fear was sort of an out-and-out thriller and I was wondering if you would ever work on something like that?

Would I ever make a horror film or slasher movie? I don't think so.

I guess everyone heard about The Last Boy Scout getting three million for the the screenplay alone and it was pretty much a by-the-number screenplay. I was wondering what you can tell us about the process of writing a screenplay that could prevent us from making another Bruce Willis buddy-action movie? How can we get three mil for something worthwhile like Do the Right Thing?

Well, I think that a screenwriter or a director has to have a vision. You have to have a unique voice and those voices are the people, the artists, that make great films. Everybody else is just imitating what's been done before. So I think it really has to come from within, from the individual. You have to have a unique voice, a desire to say something that really means something to you. That's what it takes.

Monday night on BET I saw an interview from Los Angeles with one of the stars fom Juice and he publicly criticized you, Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall for not supporting Ernest Dickerson. He said the extent of your support was to stop by the set and he said, and I quote, "Supporting Black films is more than just showing up at the premiere". He also said that in all of your movies you have had negative scenes with women. I would just like to know what your remarks are toward him?

Well, I didn't hear about the comments, but I don't know how I could have supported Ernest more than by giving him work for six movies. Ernest and I met on our first day at film school and we've worked together since. I mean we love each other. Ernest has never said that and Ernest doesn't feel that so for this actor to speak about our relationship — something he knows nothing about — I think is really ignorant.

I'd like to ask you about the whole thing with Amiri Baraka and all the hype he's started by calling you a bourgeoisie filmmaker, especially in light of the fact that he's not so grassroots living himself. Did any of the hype he started make you have second thoughts about doing X or change the way you wanted to do it?

No way. Not at all, because I had the job and he didn't. I look at it this way: the criticism is really coming out of people's love of Malcolm and not necessarily personal attacks. I said to Baraka and other people like him, "Look, if you want to make this a better film, send me all

the research you've done. Send me your screenplays, your plays, your research papers, your articles. You know, teach me. I didn't get anything. Because for the most part, people just run off their mouths and haven't done the work. So that's how I handled it. Things like that only make me stronger. But I never thought about not doing Malcolm X because Baraka said I shouldn't do it. No way.

Did you at any time request to speak with him on a personal level? He attacked you in public, as I understand, and I thought that was very unbrother-like considering all the brotherhood he speaks of. Did he try to contact you at all to discuss this?

He went public first. We were having an anniversary for the store and he showed up demonstrating with about fifty people and gave me a letter that said they didn't want me to do the film. So that was the first time I heard about it. I think on two or three Saturdays after that they had some demonstrations up in Harlem, too. But he never called me to say that he had some problems and wanted to sit down and discuss them. He went public right from the beginning.

After Jungle Fever, it was so disappointing to read about Annabella and some of the problems she experienced. Can you address that?

I can tell you what the basic problem was between me and Annabella Sciorra. She never really trusted in the script or in my vision. I mean, when I look at that film — it came out on video recently and I watched it — I had to laugh. It was a miracle to me that the film turned out as well as it did because, personally, I think she was in another movie. She played the character like she was always in love with Wesley and that was not the premise of the film. Everybody else was doing what was down on paper, what was written in the script, and she was doing something else. Jungle Fever is about two people who came together because of sexual mythology. As the relationship ensues, Angie, Annabella's character, comes to love Flipper, but Annabella played it like it was love at first sight. She acted like it had nothing to do with the attitude that "this is a Black man who's a stud and all my brothers and my father are trying to keep me away from this thing and now I'm finally going to have a Black man." I don't even think she believed that things like that happen. So that's why we had problems. Their first love scene together was a reshoot. The first time we shot, me and Wesley were pissed because she missed what the movie was about. And it wasn't like she just walked in and read the script. It wasn't a rewrite. That was what the film had always been about. It cost us a hundred-fifty-thousand dollars and a extra day to go back and reshoot that and I find that totally irresponsible.

I wanted to know how much input, if any, the Nation of Islam had in the

making of the X movie because I know they can get kind of.....

The Nation of Islam did not have any input. On all my films since Do the Right Thing, we have had security done by some brothers in the Nation, but they were not acting as the Nation of Islam. They have their own company called X-Men. They closed out three crack houses on the block when we shot Do the Right Thing. For Malcolm X, they really helped us on the research end as far as the proper way of praying and rituals in the Nation of Islam. In fact, halfway through shooting, the brothers who worked with us got the word from Chicago to get off the film, but they stayed with us and we really respect them for that. Of course, they had to fly to Chicago to talk to the minister. But in terms of the content of X, they did not have any influence at all. In fact, before we started shooting the film, I came here and met with Minister Farrakhan and was surprised to find that he was not really concerned how we portrayed Malcolm X. His main concern was how we were going to portray the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the whole thing with the secretaries that brought about the split between Malcolm and Mr. Muhammad.

So are you worried at all?

I'm not worried because we had to tell the truth.

When you first started out, how were you able to overcome a lot of negative thoughts? I'm sure a lot of people were saying that you weren't going to make it, that very few Black writers make it. As a dancer, I look up to Debbie Allen and I know that she had to overcome a lot of negative thoughts, too, and so did Josephine Baker. I'd also like to say that I really enjoy your films, but why do they always show Black people constantly using foul language? I mean, not just four-letter words, but the five-letter — the "B" word. A lot of young people watch these films and they should look at the good side of educated Black people. Look at you. You're intelligent, you come from Morehouse. I come from 63rd & Ashland, the Inglewood area — that's a tough area and very poor, thank you — but there are some Black people over there who come from the projects who don't constantly use foul language.

The reason I was able to overcome negatives is because of my parents who always instilled positive attitudes in myself and my siblings. They never told us not to do something. Parents kill more of their children's dreams than anybody else and a lot of times I don't know if they realize it. If their child wants to be an artist, or whatever, they say, "Why do you want to do that? You can't make a living like that. You better go get you a job at the post office." It's very critical, I feel, for parents to support their children's wishes and aspirations. My father and mother, being artists themselves, understood that and never held us back. To answer your question about profanity, I've used a lot of profanity in my films because that's the way the characters in my films speak. Of course it's not good for young people to hear that type of language in a film, but they probably hear that type of language at home. I'm not saying whether it's right or wrong, but I think that it's more important to have the characters in my films speak like real people and have conversations like real people. Of course, there has to be a limit and I've sometimes been accused of going past that, but I think that's something that has to be determined by the individuals in the audience.

Oh, I'm not trying to say that you should be like the Bill Cosby Show or anything like that, but.....

Well, I think more important than the language is that, as Black filmmakers, we're in a very critical stage. I know that everyone is ecstatic about the wave of new Black cinema, but there's no telling how long it's going to last. There were 19 films released in 1991, but there won't be 19 this year. The challenge of Black filmmakers today is to open up our vision and try to show more of the variety of Black life. Now this statement is not a comment on the worth or value of Straight Out of Brooklyn, Boyz N the Hood or Juice, but those stories have been told already and we're so much more diverse than that. Black filmmakers today have to have enough courage to put something else out there besides what's out there now. If we continue to make the same films again and again, we're going to die the same death we did at the end of the Black exploitation era of the early '70s. One of the reasons why those films died out is that the audience became more sophisticated. Before, we as an audience would show up for anything that had Black folks in it as long as there was some sex, some violence, some Black heroes who were fucking up some white men, and Isaac Hayes or Curtis Mayfield on the soundtrack. We showed up in droves. But as we became more sophisticated, we needed more and those films did not provide it. So we stopped going and the studios saw that we stopped going and they stopped making them. So we just switched over to karate films or the big blockbusters that started to come out at that time, like Jaws and Star Wars. And the studios saw this and asked themselves why they should make films specifically for Black audiences when we were going to these films anyway. That's what happened and it's a very critical error. Hopefully, all of us Black filmmakers want to be here for a long time and don't want this to be a trend, a flash in the pan.

I would like to talk about Malcolm X for a second. As a filmmaker, what do you hope the perception of the movie is? You've already described it as an epic. It's an important film that's going to have important meanings for Blacks, whites and all minorities, but you can't really predict the perceptions that people are going to have. You mentioned JFK. Many people are seeing that same film and getting two, three, four different ideas. Do you want one unified message to come out of this or are you prepared to accept several different messages? You've mentioned how Malcolm is more popular now than ever yet his image still means one thing to one group and another thing to another group. I just wondered if it's possible to get a unified message to everyone with a three-hour movie or is that even your goal?

Well, I don't know if we're going to have a unified message. I don't think I've yet made a film that everybody was unified about. That's one of the things I like about my films. They cause a lot of conversation and people usually have different views about them. There is a lot of material in my films, so I think a lot of views are valid. I think that what we're really trying to show with Malcolm X is that there really wasn't one Malcolm X. Malcolm X was many different people and had many different political views. He was constantly evolving. I mean, the Malcolm before Mecca is definitely not the Malcolm after Mecca. So when you're talking about Malcolm X, you really have to identify what period you're talking about and where his ideology was at that time. We knew the film had to be three hours because of this constant growth. But if there is one message, we want it to be a sort of inspiration, to show that we still can uplift ourselves. Malcolm taught himself — he educated himself in prison —

and he made himself. Of course he had assistance from other people, particularly the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, but he made himself and and I believe that other people can do the same thing.

I had a question about the music scores that you use in your films. I know your father is the principal creative person involved in that, but do you think it is an innate creativity? You know, being able to have a scene with music that synchronizes so well? It's just so creative. Most of your movies have jazz themes and it makes them Spike Lee movies.

As I said earlier, my father is a jazz musician and up until Mo' Better Blues he had done all the scores. Terence Blanchard did the score for Jungle Fever and he's going to return to do the score for Malcolm X. I was introduced to music at a very young age and it's always played an important part in my life. When I hear a song, I actually see stuff and when I shoot a scene, I can hear a song I heard ten years ago that would go great with it. To me, Jungle Fever is really the best usage of music in my films. Not only Terence Blanchard's score, but the song that Stevie wrote for the film, too. I mean, Stevie Wonder is singing and Angie's father is beating the shit out of her. I think that was a great counterpoint because this beautiful song begins with harp music and the audience has no idea what's going to happen. So she comes home with groceries to cook dinner for her father and two brothers and as soon as she opens the door they say,"A nigger!" The way we use the three Mahalia Jackson songs every time we see the Good Reverend Doctor and his wife — played by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee — and the three Frank Sinatra songs for Bensonhurst were all good uses of music. Far too often filmmakers just leave the music until the end. They shoot the film, they do everything else, and the last thing they say is, "Well, now we have to get a composer." I really think that's a backward way to do it. We're thinking about the music right at the beginning with everything else.

I have a quick political question to ask you. What do you think about the Haitians being turned away?

I think it falls in line with what I've said all along. There have always been two standards. I mean, if we have some Polish people that want to come over here or some Russians, that's OK. But if they're Black, the people making the decision say, "Black folks? Uh-uh. You gotta go." You know, it's two different standards. I mean the United States is always pushing this democracy thing and since Haiti is not a democracy now, you would think they would want to take some people in who are trying to find democracy. But they're Black and they're just not having it. At the same time the United States is going to give a $10 billion loan to Israel to kick the Palestinians out and move the Soviet Jews in. They'll give Israel $10 billion to do that and turn away Haitians in a little raft in

the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

I have a power-oriented question for you because you seem to be pretty well-versed in the subject. Film school is a great place for people to be in touch with their inner voices and the message that they want to deliver, but I don't think there's any way that it can prepare you for the power struggles that you have to face once you leave film school and get out into the business world. I think I can speak for a lot of women in the audience that were raised as nice Catholic girls. It's not easy to start dealing with heavy powermongers and you realize that you can't always play fair or you're just going to get eaten up. What was it like for you? At what point in your career did you realize that wielding power was going to have to be as big a part of your career as your aesthetic sense?

Well, I knew from the beginning that if you didn't have power and control you wouldn't be able to get your vision out there on celluloid the way you want it. For me, that was very fundamental. You're right. Film school can't prepare you for the real world, but I don't know if it necessarily should. I saw film school as a place to learn how to make films because the only way you can become a filmmaker is by making films. To be honest, I didn't really expect to learn a lot from the faculty there. That's not to say they were incompetent, but what I really wanted was the equipment to make films. And when I wasn't making films, I was working on my classmates' films. I think that 90% of the learning — not just for me, but for all film students — is done by making films. And I don't think that's negating the faculty either. I mean, how can you teach someone to make a film? You can show them a couple of things, like how to read a light meter and stuff like that, but basically, you just have to go out and do it. That's how I viewed film school.

But wasn't it difficult for you to deal with the fact that you were going to have to butt heads with people for the rest of your life?

Well, you have to do that whether you're a filmmaker or a doctor or whatever. That's just life.

Beginning with <u>Birth of a Nation</u> back in 1918, Black people have been negatively portrayed in films. This continued during the Black exploitation era and now it's the drug scene with movies like <u>Boyz N the Hood</u> and <u>Juice</u> to the point where it's causing violence in the theaters. Do you think there will ever be more films with positive Black role models? And do you think there will ever be a conglomerate of Black entertainment, like a Black Hollywood, with all the people united as one?

I don't think that <u>Juice</u> or <u>Boyz N the Hood</u> are negative at all and I don't believe that a movie can cause someone to get shot. I don't think that a rap concert causes violence either or an Air Jordan or a starter jacket. I think that we're talking about stuff that is bigger than a concert, rap, a movie or a sneaker. It's just the way young Black men feel about themselves today and the conditions they live in. It's not the sneaker, it's not the movie, you know, it ain't the rap.

That's my point. Don't you think that we need more films that deal with stronger Black male role models? Can't we dig back in history, as you're doing with Malcolm X, to show that, hey, there were oppressed Black people who somehow got out of the ghetto and survived the bullshit

that surrounded them?

I think that's what Ernest Dickerson and John Singleton were trying to do with their films. I don't know if you interpreted it that way.

Why can't we just make movies without so much controversy?

I would like that, too, but that is not the way it is. If you don't think there is anything wrong with us being denied a voice in cinema.....We need more Black films, especially the way that we as a people go to the movies.

That is a very honorable thing. But what I'm saying is that I just believe that people should be judged on their character. It doesn't matter if this is unrealistic. You have to believe in it and, even if you're the only person who does, that's your power.

Oh, I definitely feel that people should be judged on their character.

Somebody very famous — well, he's dead now, but he's still present in everybody's mind — said something like that and it carried such a power.

Who?

Dr. King said that he wished his children would not be judged on the basis of their color or race, but on the content of their mind.

How did he die?

He was shot.

Why was he shot?

Spike, I want you to understand that I respect you very much.

I don't think you're attacking me, I'm just trying to.....I know what you're saying.

I don't want to get involved in politics and why he was shot. I'm just saying that I wish I would hear less about the color of my skin.

But that's not going to change until the conditions change.

But somebody has to be the first one to start changing it.

Dr. King, the person you cited, got assassinated trying to change it. People are trying.

It's just that I feel sorry because I hear it so much and not just from white people. I hear it from minorities, too.

Thank you.

First, I'd like to start off by saying that you're a great idol of mine and a mentor. I'm into music and recording, not film, but I'd like to answer that gentleman. As a young boy, my grandparents and mother always told me to love people of other nationalities. I have white friends and I have different races of friends. We can get along, but there is still a difference. I really didn't want to get on this soapbox, but I just want that gentleman to understand that Black people do not perpetuate this great sense of racism. Most racism has been and continues to be perpetuated by European society and American propaganda. I mean, the Klansmen can go up to the mountains to hold meetings on Army property and there are a lot of other examples. See, they want to keep us uninformed and that's how they perpetuate racism. They need a Bolshevik revolution to turn over the government. That's what they need. So let's stop being ignorant. Now, primarily what I came here for is because I have something I want to give you. It's a letter, a document, and I want to personally give it to you and I want you to read it. It concerns some of the interviews you have given. I've seen how twisted interviewers have tried to turn your message around. I understand your underlying message. You're not talking about hate. You're talking about people understanding and being proud of their race and who they are. So, I would like you to read this and I would like to put it directly into your hands because I am very, very.....

Bring it ! Bring it!

I met you years ago at the student Academy Awards when you were there with your student film, Joe's Bed-Stuy Barber Shop: We Cut Heads, which I recommend that every student in the room see because Spike's in it and you can see the seeds of his later work. While you're here in Chicago, Spike, I would really like to encourage you to stop by the apartment where Fred Hampton was murdered on December 4, 1969. He was a charismatic young Black man who was killed at the age of 21 by Chicago police who were acting under FBI orders. As you probably know, the FBI had a systematic policy of eliminating anyone who could emerge as the Black messiah in this country and unify the races to fight to change the power. Since you're looking for projects, I really want to encourage you to give serious consideration to the Fred Hampton story. It's a wonderful human story, too, and I think we need heros in the 1990s that all races can look up to. Fred Hampton was a wonderful, warm human being and a hero who was cut down just as he was beginning to come into his stride. His widow lives here in Chicago and his son, Fred Hampton, Jr., is now 22 years old. If you started now, this film could be finished in time for the 25th anniversary of his murder and it would get shown all over the country. It has positive human values and it also interweaves a lot of political things that the American people have to start learning about. Since you're looking for projects, I want to invite you to come to Chicago and find the people to do this film.

Can you give me the address? And what about Fred's widow? Could you get her number for me?

Yes, I could get in touch with her.

Thank you.

Spike, I just want to say that I'm a big fan of yours as I know everybody here is and I know that we were all saddened by the death of Alex Haley. I was wondering if he had any imput in the creation of Malcolm X even though you based the material on James Baldwin's work.

James Baldwin's script is based on the autobiography that Alex worked on with Malcolm. Alex interviewed me for a program about Black filmmakers that he was working on before we went to Africa to finish shooting the film. We had the chance to show him about an hour of the film and he was very pleased with it. When we heard that he had died, it was a big blow to all of us.

I heard that you were upset when Do the Right Thing and Jungle Fever didn't win awards at Cannes. Do you think the judges over there understand Black films? And are you going to try again? It seems like every time a Black film goes there, it's shunned. I'm not saying that the other films aren't good, but it's just that I don't think we get an opportunity to really.....

I said after Jungle Fever that I would never go back, but I always have a good time in Cannes. The only blemish was when the awards came out. In '89, Do the Right Thing lost out to sex, lies and videotape and this past year Jungle Fever lost out to Barton Fink. It's not that I want to have an award on my shelf. It's more than that. When you win the Palm d'Or it's a big thing in Europe and I want to try to branch out and have my films seen the world over. That's why I wanted those awards. But we didn't get them.

I thought you were a Bulls fan!

Not when they're playing the Knicks!

Spike, first of all, I want to thank you for being one of the most responsible filmmakers out there. I think you were robbed at Cannes for Do the Right Thing because it's one of the best films ever made. I want to ask you a question that a gentleman touched on earlier and I ask it respectfully. In the introduction to the FBI files of Malcolm X, you acknowledge the Nation of Islam's role along with the CIA and FBI in his assassination. Has your relationship with the Nation changed between Do the Right Thing and Malcolm X? I also read that there was a possibility of you converting to Islam so that you could shoot first unit in Mecca.

I did not go to Mecca because the only way anyone can enter the holy city is if they convert. We sent an Islamic crew to Mecca to shoot second unit during the Hajj. I have no ill feelings toward the Nation of Islam. I don't know how Minister Farrakhan will feel about me after he sees the film, but it's not something that I lose sleep over at night. I think that the way we deal with the honorable Elijah Muhammad and his secretaries is truthful. He tried to tell me on several occasions that all these young secretaries were his wives and I don't believe that and Mr. Muhammad's wife, Clara Muhammad, definitely didn't believe that either. In the Nation of Islam, adultery and fornication are two of the biggest sins that could be committed and if you were found guilty of those sins, you were kicked out of the Nation. Every time Malcolm found an intelligent, really together sister, he would send her to work for Mr. Muhammad in Chicago and all these women mysteriously ended up pregnant and

kicked out of the Nation. It wasn't until two of them brought a paternity suit against Mr. Muhammad that this thing really went public. There was whispering in the Nation, but people didn't believe it because Mr. Muhammad was viewed as a god. The way I see it, he was a great man, but he was also a human being, a flawed human being, and that's the way we dealt with him in the film.

I'd like to thank you for helping me find my vision and my passion.

Are you a filmmaker or an actor?

I'm a graduate student in film at Columbia and I also went to your homecoming rival, Howard University, for my undergraduate degree.

You went to Howard? Ernest went to Howard.

Yeah, I know. I'd like to know how involved you are in the post-production of your films.

I'm all in there. I mean, you just can't shoot a film, walk away and then expect it to turn out the way you envisioned it. You have to stay with it all the way from making the film to working with the studio to promotion and marketing.

Do you see distribution as a viable way of helping Blacks distribute their films? How can you get distribution without having upteen trillion dollars?

You can't. That's why we haven't been able to do it as a people.

But do you see any movement in the future, some kind of unified factor.....

All I hear is talk. That's it.

It seems that the Black exploitation era came about because Hollywood was in trouble financially. Do you think that there is a resurgence because Hollywood has not made as big of a return on its investment as it would like? They have a tendency to use African-American people to bring them out of it, but once they get out of it, they push us aside.

Well, I don't know if that's happening, but I think it's good that Hollywood was in a slump and Black films provided a shot in the arm. Now it's up to the filmmakers to ensure that this is not a fad and the only way to do that is by making better and more varied films.

There was a shot in <u>Jungle Fever</u> that really bothered me and I just wanted to know why you used it. It was the shot with Paulie.....

Paulie and Angie. They're walking, right?

Yeah. I saw a variation of that shot before, but the person was standing still and the room moved around very fast. I never really saw it done the way you did it and I was just wondering

why you used that particular shot. What was the motivation behind it? I didn't think it worked, but that's just my opinion.

We did that shot twice. I liked it! We just put a camera and the actors on a dolly and had the grip pull it down the block.

So you were just experimenting to see how it would look?

Yeah, I try to do different things different ways, so instead of just having two people walking down the street, they're gliding.

Oh, OK. Well, thanks a lot.

Thank you.

Thank God for you and your efforts. I would like to commend you on everything that you have done. Have you ever contemplated making Black-oriented children's films, like fairy tales? Because kids need good stuff like that, too.

There is a definite need for that, but I don't know if I'm the person to do it.

Can I shake your hand because you've always been my tootsie roll?

Yeah, you can do it. But what's a tootsie roll? What does that mean? Is it just a Chicago thing?

In your films you show how Black people feel, act, think and are perceived in this society. When an interviewer asks you a question about how you want white people to feel when they leave the theater, what do you say? How do you feel about this? I think that white society and the media often want Black people to explain why they act a certain way. Explain rap, explain, you know, Jungle Fever.....

I think that's a very good point. It really just comes from ignorance. If white people don't really know anything about us as a people, how can they ask intelligent questions? I think it's a reflection of America in general. I mean, I think it makes sense that the majority knows a lot less about the minority than the minority knows about the majority. All we as a people see is white folks on TV, in movies, magazines, newspapers, etc. I think that it was always hoped that if there was more cultural exchange there would be a better understanding among the races. But I don't know if that's true because Cosby's got the number one show on TV and white folks love Michael Jordan, Arsenio Hall and Michael Jackson. I don't think that the instances of racism have gone down because of them, so that whole thing is out the window. I don't know what's going to bring about a better understanding. I remember a theory from the '60s. We thought, well, if they just know more about us, if they just, you know, dance like us and if they hear our music and know our culture and this and that, then everything will be fine. But that really hasn't been the case.

Please keep on giving us a reflection of ourselves through art. I'm just happy that your films are very entertaining and stay with me and make me think. It's more than just a visual thing.

Thank you.

My friend and I are independent filmmakers and the subject matter that we like to tackle is drunk driving and racism. Basically, we are trying to show the positive side of young Black males. You can't hide the issues of violence, gangbanging or whatever, but we try to reverse that. What do you feel about this subject matter?

If the script is good it could be a good film.

Well, we both have completed scripts and want to know if you would have time to read them.

Yes, but I won't be able to take them with me. Please send them.

We were talking before about double standards and I'd like to ask you about that in terms of distribution. Here in Chicago, there are two main theater chains, Loews and Cineplex Odeon, but Cineplex Odeon seems to be the only one that shows Black filmmakers' films or even films featuring Black stars. I recently saw <u>Juice</u> and liked it a lot, but where these films are being shown bothers me.

So that means you had to go into a Black neighborhood to see <u>Juice</u>, right?

No, no, no, it's not necessarily that. Now don't twist my words. I haven't even said anything yet. Don't make me come over there and..... No, what I'm saying is.....

Where did you see it?

At Chestnut Station. It's not a bad theater, but it's not a premiere theater either. It's also a theater that shows a lot of slasher and karate films and I feel that they are lumping in Black filmmakers' films with them and it's making them inaccessible. I went to the library and found that every film you've made since <u>School Daze</u> has been shown there. Robert Townsend's films, too. Maybe Cineplex Odeon should be congratulated for at least showing the works of Black filmmakers, but I think there is definitely a problem here. I want to know what you think about it and what I can do about it.

You can write to the people here in Chicago, but this is something that Black filmmakers are up against all the time. We're ghettoized. Theater owners feel that, for the most part, a white audience is not going to go see a Black film, so they put it in a Black neighborhood, and if it's a film that white people might want to see, they might not want to go into a Black neighborhood, and if they stick it in a white neighborhood, Black folks might not want to go. So it's more than just marketing that we're dealing with here. It's a whole sociological thing. It's a struggle, but you could write to them so they know that you know what they're doing.

I mean, <u>Malcolm X</u> is going to come out at Christmas and I think it would be great if as many

people as possible got to see it.

I agree!

I'm an aspiring screenwriter and will be sending you something real soon. It seems that when you come up with an idea for a screenplay, there are several issues within that idea that you want to develop. How do you get to the point of those issues? How do you express yourself?

How do I get to it?

Yeah. I mean, there are several issues within an idea.

Talk specifically. Give me an example.

There were several things going on in Jungle Fever. So how did you get to what you wanted to express? All of us got different things from your screenplay.

Well, Jungle Fever really has a lot of things going on at the same time and that was the intention going in. When I write a script I'm not really sitting down and analyzing how I'm going to do these things. I just write it. So I don't know if I can really answer your question.

I'm a student at the Art Institute of Chicago and my question to you is about my future.

And what part I have in it, right?

Yeah, and I'd also like to know what made you decide to go into film? What made you decide to use that as a medium for your expression?

Well, I really didn't become a filmmaker at a young age. It happened later, while I was in college. I went to Morehouse College in Atlanta and had to choose a major so I chose mass communications. Under mass communications you learned about film, TV, journalism and radio, so I bought a Super-8 camera and one summer I just started to shoot stuff because I didn't have a job. I found it was something that I really liked and wanted to pursue. When I graduated I still hadn't mastered the craft of filmmaking, so I went to NYU film school to learn more.

I just want to ask you to keep doing what you're doing and uplift the race.

Thank you.

I'm a film student myself and I admire you over other filmmakers because everything in your films makes me think and you always have a message. But, for that same reason, I think the controversial issues make it more difficult. Does it make it more difficult?

It really hasn't made it difficult because the films I've done have made money. But if you're asking me if there is an easier way.....Is filmmaking easy? It's not. It's hard and it's going to

be even harder for you because you're a woman, but you just have to overcome that and go ahead and do what you have to do. I mean, it's no accident that there are only a handful of female directors.

First of all, I would like to say that the Bulls will beat the Knicks again. Second of all, I'm curious as to the extent of your control over the way they advertise your films on television. I was looking at the way they advertised Juice, New Jack City and Boyz N the Hood. Right after the advertisements, I heard about Black-on-Black violence and, most recently, I heard about a girl being shot at a screening of Juice.

Was she killed?

Yes, and the media blames the violence and the drug problem on films like these. All these films have been anti-drug films, but they have been shown in such a way that I guess would tend to attract this kind of thing.

I have a big say in how my films are marketed. I'm not going to say I have final control, but I have a lot of input and, luckily, there hasn't been a campaign that I haven't been happy with. But you have no control over how the media is going to portray your film. When Do the Right Thing came out, they said it was going to start riots. I mean, that's something that's beyond the filmmaker's control.

Do you think that because you are a young Black filmmaker it is probably essential to try to have as much control as possible?

For anybody.

Who is your favorite director and what is your favorite film?

I don't really have a favorite film, but one of my favorite directors is Martin Scorsese.

You mentioned the Black female director Julie Dash. Are there any other Black female directors you admire?

Well, I don't know if I would use the word admire. I do understand the struggle they're going through. I mean, I would like to admire their work once they are given an opportunity to put their art into the world and I get to see it. There are several Black women filmmakers, but it's just going to take a while. There will be African-American sisters directing films. It's gonna happen.

I'm originally from Chicago, but I flew all the way here from Los Angeles because I wanted to be able to present you with just one piece of paper — my business card. Is Arthur Klein still your counsel?

Yes, him and Lisa Davis.

There's been a lot of discussion over the last few years about a mechanism by which Blacks can finance, market and distribute their films. There are people that are actively pursuing ways to finance Black feature films and I've put together a fund that will be operational in the spring.

How much money?

I can't say in front of all these people, but I just want to make you aware that this fund is a way for you to move independently. I mean I'm going to be talking with Robert Townsend and I've already discussed things with the Hudlins because there is a way to finance your films based on the economics that have developed over the years. So I'd like you to have Arthur Klein or Lisa Davis give my counsel a call and we can get to work on this process. It is a large sum of money and there are a lot of non-Black filmmakers that are lining up for these funds right now so I just wanted you to be aware.

Thank you. And your name is.....Oh, a mystery man, huh?

I want to follow up on the question about film financing. What would you recommend for minorities who want to participate on any level of film financing? And do you ever see yourself at a point where you act as a surety bonder for low-budget, independent Black films, maybe as a way to introduce Blacks into presold distribution rights, negative pick-ups and things of that nature?

Yes, that's something I want to do because it needs to be done. I think that by using my power, I can help get some lower budget films made. I want people who have ideas or projects to write to me. I'll listen to them.

If the success of Malcolm X surpasses the success of JFK, do you anticipate that it will be nominated for any Academy Awards?

Well, I would bet my life on Denzel Washington getting an Academy Award because Denzel is phenomenal in this film. He's great. That's the only thing I'm sure about.

What is it going to take for the Academy Awards to recognize Black filmmakers and actors?

What's it going to take? Some more Black Academy members.

You have this relationship, particularly in Jungle Fever and Do the Right Thing, with Blacks and Italians. I'm not Italian, but I was just wondering if there was a certain meaning behind it.

Yeah, there's a certain meaning because in New York City those are the two groups that don't get along. And not only don't they get along, but it always ends in violence. I got the idea for Do the Right Thing from the Howard Beach incident in which three Black men were driving home and their car got a flat and they went into a pizzeria where they were chased by guys swinging tree limbs and baseball bats and one guy who was running for his life got hit by a car. Jungle Fever was inspired by what happened to Yusuf Hawkins, the young Black teenager who was shot dead in Bensonhurst. He went there to look for a used car and the guys

who shot him thought he was coming there to visit a Puerto Rican woman who went out with some of the Italian guys from the neighborhood. So this continually volatile relationship between Blacks and Italians in New York City is the reason we chose those groups for those films.

You talked about Boyz N the Hood being made for under $6 million and grossing $50 million. Well, after the fellow from Poland complained about people talking about color so much, I started thinking about all the different ways that people are disenfranchised, be they Black or female or of a certain religion, etc., but what I'm really interested in is what happens to the money. You talked about the glass ceiling and....

What money? The money that's made from most films?

Well, the $50 million....

That went back to Columbia Pictures.

Does it go back to the filmmakers or stay within the power structure?

I don't know, but I'll ask John if he's seen any money yet. I know the Hudlin brothers made House Party for $2 or 3 million and the film made $28 million, but New Line, who distributed the film, said they haven't made any money yet. I mean, Hollywood has always been famous for its accounting.

You told the fellow who talked about a filmmaker needing trillions of dollars that you can't do it unless you have a lot of money. Do you advocate becoming part of the system?

I think that even if you do raise the money independently, if you want your film to be seen by people, you have to go to their distribution because nothing else is set up. I'm not going to hibernate. I'm not going to retire and wait for Black folks to get a distribution system. I'll be glad when it happens, but in the meantime, my films are going to be released through a Hollywood studio.

The youth these days are into this pro-Black and back-to-Africa movement and they accept Public Enemy and people like that openheartedly. I see Malcolm X being much more revolutionary and enlightening and I want to know if you think that they will be ready for Malcolm X?

Well, first of all, I hope that they're going to like it and that it will spark interest in Malcolm. Most kids today, Black and white, don't read, period. Hopefully, this movie will spark their interest enough so they will read Malcolm's autobiography and other materials about him because there is

a lot of stuff out. I realize that a lot of kids out there are wearing "X" hats and Malcolm X t-shirts, but their knowledge of Malcolm is really superficial and there is an intense education process that has to go on. If buying or wearing a t-shirt or hat is a first step, then I welcome it. I'd rather have them wear an "X" hat than a Batman or Bart Simpson hat. Hopefully, the hats and the t-shirts will be just the first step. If they get interested enough to study Malcolm X, a lot of the negative stuff they are doing would stop.

When I know that a film is going to be made, I sometimes sit back and try to figure out who I would put into a role and for the role of Malcolm X, I chose Larry Fishburne because I feel that he's a strong actor and resembles Malcolm X a lot. Now, I also like Denzel Washington and feel that he would do a good job, but did you consider anyone else or was Denzel the perfect choice?

As I said earlier, Denzel was signed to play this role before I was even part of the project. Larry Fishburne still feels that he should have played Malcolm X and Larry's a great actor — we worked together on <u>School Daze</u> — but I can't agree with you. I think that.....Well, just wait until you see the film. Denzel Washington was the right choice for Malcolm X.

I just came to say thank you for coming out and giving back to the community. I've seen all your films and talk to many different people about them and they always want to know why you don't have concrete endings. My perception is that you are trying to give people a chance to open up their minds. You are trying to raise consciousnesses by giving people the opportunity to communicate with one another.

Thank you.

I always hear people discussing what they thought your best movie was. What do you think your best movie was and, excluding <u>Malcolm X</u>, do you have a favorite?

I probably like <u>Jungle Fever</u> the best but, for me, the most important film to date has been <u>She's Gotta Have It</u> because that film made everything else possible. But I cannot watch that film anymore!

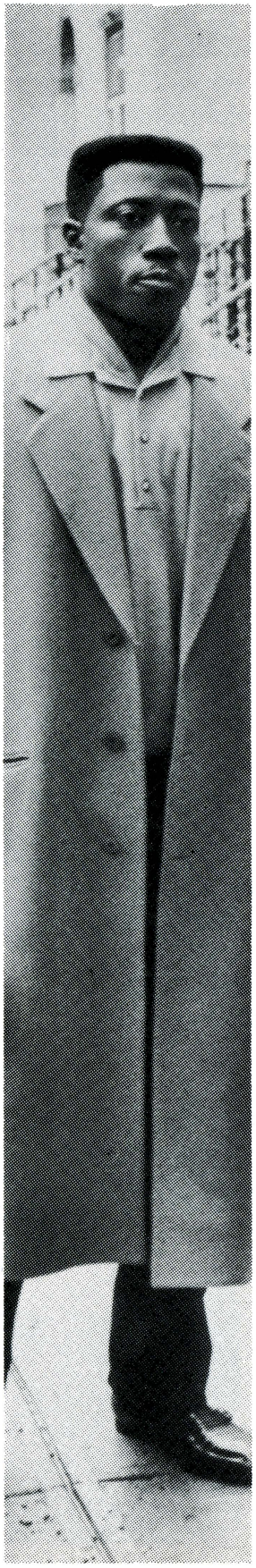
What's that "wake up" thing that's at the beginning and the end of some of your movies? Is there any meaning behind it? Who made that up? Where did it come from? (To audience) You're all saying "Wake up!" like "Wake up, Black people!", but he might have a different meaning behind it so let him answer my question.

You don't know, huh?

No.

There's a meaning behind it. It's not random. It means "Wake up!"

I want to ask a question that is related to that. Are there any subliminal messages in your films?



The guy's screaming "Wake up!". I don't think that's subliminal.

I mean, other than that. I'm talking about non-verbal things. Well, anyway, your films are quite interesting to me. I am an artist in a sense because I write poetry and I really got inspired the first time I saw your films, particularly Do the Right Thing and Jungle Fever. Is there a running theme in your films? For example, when Wesley Snipes holds that young girl in his arms at the end of Jungle Fever, that's a non-verbal cue that makes you think about a lot of things in terms of the genocide that's being perpetrated on Black people. This should be obvious to everyone, but unfortunately, it's not. I want to say one more thing and then I'll be done. I found the crack scenes in the Taj Mahal very interesting and I thought that Stevie Wonder's music was very intense and dramatic. It felt like I was right there. I read a lot of articles in The Washington Post when they were doing a series on crack children and they described it to a tee. They were so profound that they made an imprint on my mind so when I saw your film I was like, "Oh, my god! This is what the articles talked about." What you portrayed in that film was very realistic.

Well, on the contrary. We didn't want that scene to be realistic. We wanted it to be surreal. When Ernest and I talked about how we were going to shoot this, we decided that we wanted it to be surreal. There are no crack houses that big. We wanted to exercise artistic license to try to drive home the point of how much crack is devastating lives. We wanted this to be a descent into hell and all throughout the soundtrack we had this sucking sound that represented people's souls being sucked away as they sucked on those crack pipes. The scene was really about Wesley's descent into hell. It's totally surreal.

I am a filmmaker, too, and I want to know how a Black female in America can break into this business with respect, without having to portray her sisters as sluts and dope fiends? And I'd also like to say to the Columbia professors who teach film that I am not Spike Lee and I am not John Singleton. I made my first film last semester and I wanted it to be a comedy, but I ended up having to make a meaningful, dope fiend movie. That was not my intention at all. I just want people to stop comparing Black film students to Spike Lee and John Singleton. I love you, Spike, and your movies are going off, but I don't know how to put forth your views like you do. I like to make people laugh and I want respect as a comic director. Stop making me do Spike Lee and John Singleton movies. Let me do my comedy.

Why didn't you just go ahead and do the film you wanted to do anyway?

Because my.....I don't want to talk about my teacher. He's a really good guy and I love him. He really helped me. Is he here?

Wait, don't front now. You're waiting for that grade before you come out with it and you're looking around to see if he's here.

Yeah, I was seeing if he was here, but I don't think he showed up. The reason I changed it is because he was saying things like, "That won't be funny. Wasn't that on Fresh Prince?"

See, it's your fault then.

It's not my fault because I wanted to get my grade.

It's your fault because you did not go ahead and do the film that you wanted to do in the first place.

But the point still remains. I don't know about other film schools — I don't go to the Art Institute or NYU — but I do know that the Black students at Columbia are compared to you.

That's wrong. You shouldn't let them turn you around.

Well, this semester I've already decided that I'm not going to let them change my views. How can we make meaningful movies and still get exposure?

You have to write those scripts.

Well, you'll being hearing from me real soon then.

OK.

Spike, in Jungle Fever there were three scenes that I thought were very powerful and I was wondering if any of them were improvised. One was where Ossie Davis and Wesley Snipes were talking about how the white woman was put on a pedestal.

Ossie wrote that monologue.

The second one was when they were in Turturro's shop and they were talking about Dinkins and Marion Barry.

A lot of that was improv.

OK. And the third one was when all the women were just talking about their men.

A lot of that was improv, too.

My sole purpose was to come here to ask if I could be a part of your next project, but I was kind of down about your response to a brother earlier on. Anyway, I watched a show last night that had so many ethnic groups, but there were only two Blacks and I think that in this society it's who you know, not what you can do. As an actor, I figure the only way to my dream is by meeting someone like you or a film actor or somebody in a position to give me a job.

Wait a minute. First of all, nobody gives you a job. You have to show talent and you have to show that you're the best person for the role. When somebody comes up to me and says, "Put me in your next movie," I cannot tell whether he can act or not. What he could do instead is send me a headshot and resume or a VHS tape that shows me his talent.

But even with a resume, headshot and tape, he may not look like the person that you want for the role so he still hasn't.....

That's right.

.....gotten that opportunity, right?

That's right. That's why acting is a tough profession. You might be a great actor, but if you're not right for a particular role, you don't get the part.

But what I'm saying is that it seems like with other ethnic groups it doesn't matter whether somebody can act or not. You see what I'm saying?

That's not true. It's just not true. There are a lot of white actors out of work, too.

I believe that. It's just that I am confused because I feel I'm on the outside looking in and I really don't have anyone to tell me what's what.....I'm just saying that there are a lot of people out here that have.....I feel that I have natural talent.

There are a lot of people out there who have natural talent, but you have to get to a place where people who have some power can see that talent. If they don't see it, they'll never know about you.

I appreciate the fact that your movies show Black men and women being affectionate toward each other. You don't show unemployed Black men or Black men who beat their women. You show articulate Black men that have real jobs and I really appreciate that because all Black men are not poor, hanging out on the corner wanting to do nothing and become nothing.

Thank you.

A number of times after seeing your films I've gotten into conversations with people, usually white people, who say things like, "I didn't know that Black people did this." We're diverse among ourselves and this came up after I saw <u>School Daze</u> with its internal racism among

Black people, and Jungle Fever, specifically in the scene with the five women. What were you trying to do with that scene? That was one of the few times in your films where Black women speak their voice, from their view, from the heart. Because a lot of it was improvised, I would like to know what your expectations were.

There was a script and we rehearsed for two days, but the actors were encouraged to bring their own personal experiences into the dialogue to make it more real. What was the purpose of the scene?

I understand what the purpose of the scene was, but I want to know what you wanted in the context of the entire movie?

Well, we wanted a scene where we saw a group of Black women venting their anger at the Black men who have gone astray and at white women who go out with Black men.

What are your intentions, if any, of filming a movie in Chicago?

Well, I would like to film something here in Chicago, but not during the winter. Subject matter determines the location for my films so if Chicago was the best place for one then I would shoot here.

I'd like to say, first of all, that you've been an inspiration to me since film school. Six films in seven years is a fantastic record! I'd like to know what influence your agent played in that?

Agent? I don't have an agent. The people that played a part in it were the people I mentioned before — Monty Ross, Ernest Dickerson, Wynn Thomas, Earl Smith, Robi Reed. We're all still working together and, for the most part, you might hear about Spike Lee, but there's a whole gang of us that are united in trying to make good cinema.

Could you shed a little light on your experience as a film director as far as the networking between Black artists and the filmmaking community in America? It seems to me that most of the artists are coming from the coasts, but there are a lot of good filmmakers here in Chicago who are trying to find viable ways to get into that market, too.

Well, I like doing music videos. I'm fortunate that I'm in a position where I can pick and choose the songs or artists that I like, but for the most part, I don't do that many. I also see music videos and commercials — the Levis and the Nike commercials — as filmmaking. Just like I tell a story in a feature film, I try to do the same thing with music videos and commercials while trying to sell a product at the same time. It's just a different format.

Do you pitch your own ideas or are you approached?

Sometimes I'm approached and sometimes I'm not. Right now, we're doing a video for Prince and that should be ready by the end of February.

I've noticed that you use a lot of the same actors all the time. Are you open to new actors?

We're very open to new actors and, as I said before, we try to keep three or four spots open on each film for new talent. This past June I gave a commencement speech at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn where Dr. Betty Shabazz teaches and I saw one of the students who was there speaking and I said to myself that this guy has something on the ball so I suggested that he come down for an audition. He got the part. There are stories like that on every film we've done. I had a birthday party in Los Angeles and met Rosie Perez because she was dancing on a speaker. After talking to her, I decided to make Mookie's girlfriend Puerto Rican instead of Black. Robin Harris had never been in a film before, so we had a lot of new talent. At the same time, I have a core of actors who are very good, but more importantly, they don't repeat themselves. Giancarlo Esposito's Buggin Out is not Lefthand Lacey from Mo' Better Blues, is not the bum he played in Jungle Fever and he's not the assassin in Malcolm X. Ossie Davis is not Da Mayor and he's not the Good Reverend Doctor. John Turturro's Pino in Do the Right Thing is not Paulie in Jungle Fever, is not Flatbush in Mo' Better Blues. Bill Nun is not Grady in School Daze or Radio Raheem in Do the Right Thing and he's not Bottom in Mo' Better Blues. These actors are very versatile and a lot of people don't even realize that it's the same actor doing different parts. That's why I use them. Also, a lot of these people are my personal friends and we get along great. I have no problems with them and that's why I continue to use them again and again. If they were not successful in their parts, I would not use them again. But they're great actors.

I just want to get your views on Mike Tyson.

I already talked about this. I think that what happened to Mike Tyson is unfortunate. I'm not saying whether or not he raped the sister, but there are two standards of justice in this country. Someone else can get off for rape with 300 hours worth of community work while Mike faces 63 years in prison.

As a director, how do you approach the actors right before you shoot a scene? Also, are you acting in Malcolm X?

Yeah, I'm acting in Malcolm X. I play Shorty. When we're shooting we rehearse a lot to make the actors feel comfortable. We talk about the scene, we block it out if we need to, and we only shoot when everybody feels ready.

I know that for any artist whatever they do has to be entertaining, but in terms of the audience, what is most important to you? Is it personal or is it spiritual or do you want the audience to have a better view of how they fit into society? In what way would you like your movies to have an impact on

people's lives?

Well, I don't know how much impact films can really have and I don't know if a film can change a person's life. We're just happy if people discuss things, if they think about what we've just put them through for two hours. There are too many films that you see and then on your way home on the subway or the bus or walking to the car in the parking lot you forget what you just saw because it's disposable entertainment. It just washes over you. Hopefully, we make stuff that sticks with you long after you've seen the film.

You were talking about diversity in storylines. Do you think that we should have more films that show Blacks and whites working together and show that not all white people are "the man" and that a lot of people do work together?

That could be one film, but I don't think every film has to be like that.

I'm a local songwriter and producer and, although I haven't seen the movie yet, I feel like I may have the perfect soundtrack for Malcolm X. If I send it to you, will it just sit around like a lot of other stuff or will you get it?

Send it.

What's going on with 40 Acres and a Mule Musicworks? Are you looking to branch out into music and producing?

Well, we have a label and we are accepting demos.

Coming to Chicago to do a film about Harold Washington would be great for you. Ossie Davis would be great as the mayor and we've got a great tradition of blues here. My question is more political. There is a trend toward all-Black male schools that teach young Black boys to become men. As a social commentator, not as a filmmaker, do you think this is a good idea?

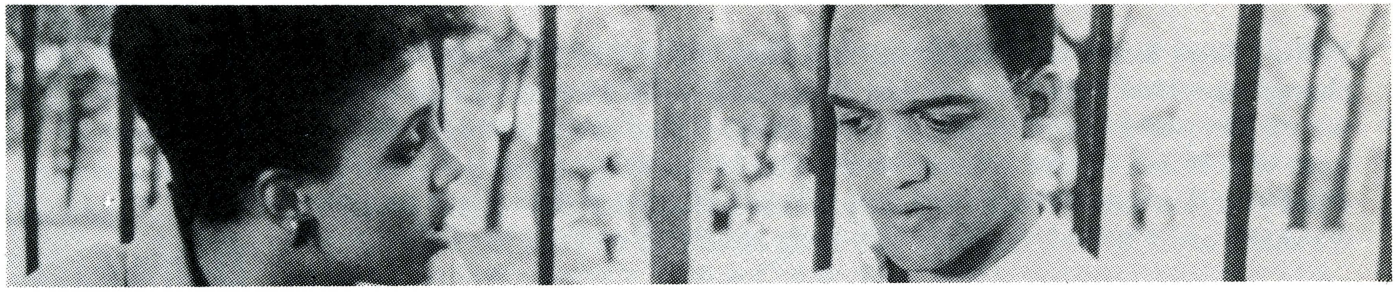
I think that it's definitely needed. I don't think all schools need to be like that, but I think young Black kids need some good role models and it would help them to be taught by young Black men.

Andrew Young once said, "Without a struggle, there is no success." What has been the greatest struggle of your career and why are there no sequels to any of your movies?

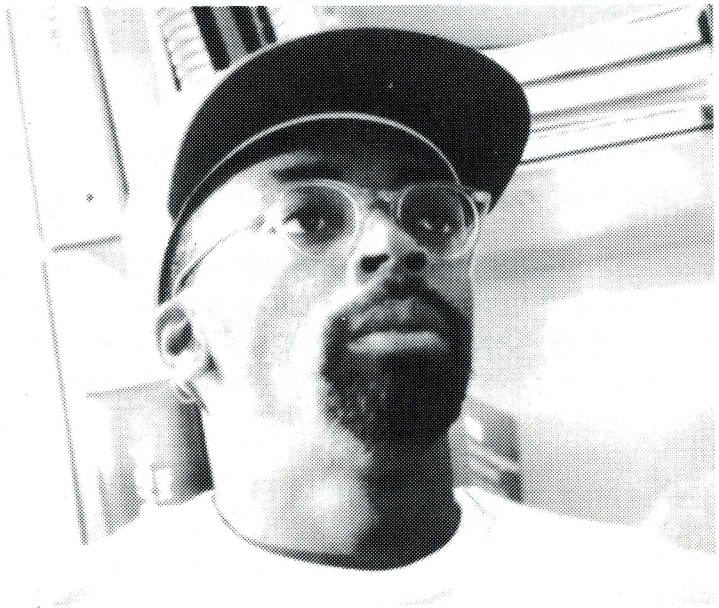
Well, I think that there are too many stories to be told for me to be doing sequels, especially since I've only done six films. I have too many ideas, too many stories to tell. The biggest struggle was to get She's Gotta Have It made because it was the first. We practically killed ourselves to get that film made, and luckily, we did the right thing and we were able to get it done.

Keep hope alive and Air Jordan will fly tonight.

Thank you very much.



1986 She's Gotta Have It
1988 School Daze
1989 Do The Right Thing
1990 Mo' Better Blues
1991 Jungle Fever
1992 Malcolm X



This monograph was produced by
the Department of Film & Video
of Columbia College Chicago

Department Co-Chairs: *Chap Freeman & Doreen Bartoni*
Editor: *Gina Richardson*
Designers: *Gina Richardson & Verdi Davis*
Transcription: *Erica Samuels*
Layout: *Kevin Riordan*
Director of Printing Services: *Gordon Bierberle*
Photographer: *Pam Susemiehl*
Film stills courtesy of *Scott E. Marks & Richard Beer*

Department of Film & Video
Columbia College Chicago
600 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60605-1996